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Life and Death: Spiritual Philosophy in Anna Karenina

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CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE

LIFE AND DEATH: SPIRITUAL PHILOSOPHY IN ANNA KARENINA

SUBMITTED TO

DEAN NICHOLAS WARNER

BY

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FOR

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Abstract

This paper examines the structure, title, epigraph, and spiritual philosophy of Leo Tolstoy's great novel, *Anna Karenina*. The intricate structure of the novel can leave more questions than it answers, and as the novel was written at such a critical, complex time of Tolstoy's life, the ideas the characters struggle with in *Anna Karenina* are of both daily and cosmic importance. Considering influences and criticism of the novel, the method of Tolstoy's vision of living well as shown in *Anna Karenina* leads to a very specific and intricate spiritual philosophy. It is also found that the novel's structure and title are in conflict.

Acknowledgements

This thesis, although officially the work of a single semester, really was begun just short of a year ago, when I decided that the only logical thing for me to do was to write my thesis on my favorite novel, *Anna Karenina*. It was perhaps the best decision of my academic career thus far, because I can honestly say that there were few moments when I did not enjoy working on my thesis. It is a subject I intend continuing to explore on my own volition for years to come.

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You know me too well.

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Introduction

1. Structural and Philosophic Concerns

For more than a hundred years, *Anna Karenina* has been regarded as one of the greatest works of literature of all time. With its many complexities, its various intertwining stories and ideas, a scholar could spend a lifetime devoted to picking apart the intricacies of the novel.

Yet modern knowledge of the average person who has not read the novel is based on a handful of conceptions proliferated by reluctant or frivolous readers and the film adaptations that have been made throughout the decades. This knowledge can be reduced to this: “*Anna Karenina* is a long novel about a woman who cheats on her husband and then kills herself by jumping in front of a train.” A statement such as this could almost pass as a simplistic plot summary of one of the two main storylines, but such a surface viewing of the novel misses out on all of the novel’s finer points.

Among the more neglected characters in *Anna Karenina* is Konstantin Levin, the landowner whose most famous passages are dismissed frequently by many casual readers as boring farming and hunting scenes, although such scenes are only a fraction of his important moments in the novel. He hunts; he thinks; he lives an incredibly powerful life as a suitor, a newlywed, a brother, and a father. The popular disregard for the importance of his character is puzzling considering how much space of the novel is given to Levin and his thoughts and development. As a character that is arguably the central character of the novel, both structurally and philosophically,

how is Levin so easily throw aside as a secondary or even minor character? How is a novel named *Anna Karenina* so full of scenes about a character called Konstantin Levin?

These questions address the flaw in popular logic regarding the book. Considering this flaw leads to many questions on plot and character, on the importance of Levin and his sufferings, on the validity of the title. The first such question is relative to the structure of the novel. Gary Saul Morson divides the novel up by plot and discovers that the “main” plotline of the affair consists not of quite half the novel, equal to Levin’s plot, with the remainder taken up by Stiva and Dolly (38). In a novel that is supposedly about the affair that leads to suicide, why is there equal time given to the story of Levin? And perhaps more importantly, why, after the suicide has occurred, does the final book continue to tell the story of Levin if the “story” is already over?

Another such line of questioning is in regard to the title, related strongly to the structure of the novel. Indeed, entitling the novel *Anna Karenina* suggests immediately to the reader that the novel is about the character for which it is named. This title draws the reader into the storyline centered on the affair and suicide. Why is the book, equally focused on the Karenin-Vronsky-Karenina storyline and the Levin storyline, entitled *Anna Karenina*? Many scholars have come up with differing reasons why this title was chosen and maintained even after the Levin storyline became a prominent feature of the novel, but as there seems to be little agreement between these scholars, the question is raised as to whether any of their solutions are actually satisfying. If these defenses of the title are not satisfying, is this because the

proper defense has not been found, or that Tolstoy made a mistake with the title? Continually, if the title is the wrong title, what are possible substitutes that better suit the novel?

Inextricably tied to the structure and title of the novel is the actual spiritual philosophy of the novel. Because of the particular structural technique Tolstoy utilizes and the questions addressed within the novel (both of which contribute to the concerns with the title), a very specific spiritual philosophy on living well is formed. This philosophy manifests itself, in all of the various storylines and their developments. Nowhere, though, is it more manifest than in the struggles of Konstantin Levin to bring his experiences and rationality into harmony with some way of living well. Themes by which to assess the other storylines come directly from the spiritual philosophy Levin develops over the course of the novel, and his final revelations in Part VIII gives a guiding light which retroactively illuminates all other events of the novel. Questions addressed in examining this begin with this revelation: what is it, and how does Tolstoy build up to it throughout the novel? How does this philosophy and both its culmination in the final book and the way it builds throughout the novel relate to the structure of the novel and its intertwining storylines?

Fourth and finally, there is the question of the epigraph of the novel. That is, of course, tied closely with the other questions. The epigraph is not only the second thing any reader reads (after the title), but *Anna Karenina*'s epigraph is one of its best known lines. The message on vengeance has been read a number of ways since its publication, as noted extensively by Christopher Fort in his essay on Levin's

relationship with to the epigraphy (1). What exactly does the epigraph mean in conjunction with the spiritual philosophy of the novel? Considering the two-part structure of the epigraph as set out by Fort – in which a person must both submit to judgment from a higher power and refrain from judging both themselves and others – how does this correspond to the structure of the novel as a whole? What does the epigraph uncover about the novel at the start, and what is uncovered about the epigraph by the final book of the novel?

2. Source Materials

The obvious starting point for any study of Anna Karenina is the novel itself. Moving outward from there is myriad of possibilities, especially depending on the type of study that is being made. Various biographers, scholars, and critics were consulted, including Donna Tussing Orwin, Richard Gustafson, Vladimir Alexandrov, and Gary Saul Morson. These readings provided both collaborative and conflicting insights on the above questions, and also led to further sources of a different sort, namely the philosophers Schopenhauer and Rousseau, both of whom Tolstoy read. Texts by these philosophers were considered carefully and selected based on inclusion of spiritual philosophy. Thus in particular was chosen Rousseau's *The Creed of the Priest of Savoy*, which arguably is the precursory piece to the Orthodox priest Tolstoy creates for Levin's confession, right down to their both using the natural world and its wonders to explicate that God must exist.

Orwin and Gustafson, however, set up the main dichotomy between the religious and philosophic influences upon Tolstoy's thinking, and subsequently on

his work. This discussion is worth briefly considering, as both sides have arguments of merit and relevance to the purpose of *Anna Karenina*.

2.1 The Philosophical Argument

Orwin follows the philosophic transformation of Tolstoy throughout his career. She argues the important influence that various Western philosophers had on Tolstoy's philosophy, which is then shown through the interactions in his novels. She is not the first to recognize the philosophic nature of the novel, citing *The Early Works of Count. L. N. Tolstoy*, in which Apollon Grigor'ev purports that Tolstoy was a "writer in search of an idea that would rescue him from the nihilism...generated by his own analytical powers" (Orwin, 3). Two philosophers she holds in particular importance, especially in regard to *Anna Karenina*, are Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Arthur Schopenhauer. These two are the most obviously relevant to students of Tolstoy because he was known to greatly admire Rousseau, and to have read all of his works. Likewise, he was enamored with Schopenhauer before and during the time he was working on *Anna Karenina*, and the reconciliation with the optimism of Rousseau and the seeming pessimism of Schopenhauer was very difficult for him.

Anna Karenina, Orwin argues, is at least in part Tolstoy's attempt to coalesce his own optimism with the pessimistic views of Schopenhauer, whom he had enthusiastically read (150). The discussion of the nature of man is a major point of distinction between Rousseau and Schopenhauer. Is man naturally morally corrupt, or is he corrupted by society? According to Orwin, Schopenhauer claims the former, Rousseau the latter, and Tolstoy seems to side with Rousseau. Society, however, is simply the organization and grouping of men systematically. The question then

becomes, if man is not at least partially corrupt inherently, how can such an ordering of men corrupt man? This is a question that could possibly have troubled Tolstoy, and his ascribing certain qualities to the natures of certain characters could signify his thoughts on the matter. Also according to Orwin's reading of Schopenhauer, man has the capacity to choose morality, to become moral in spite of inborn selfishness (150-151). How does man accomplish this?

According to Schopenhauer, it is necessary to get rid of the inborn, selfish, sinful desire of human happiness, abandoning it completely. "If this proved impossible, then the individual must yearn for, indeed do all he could to bring about, his own suicide" (Orwin, 154). In his reading of Schopenhauer, Tolstoy must have found the pessimistic regard of human happiness as antithesis of morality to be lethal to his Rousseau-esque optimism, and his multiple considerations of suicide relate not only to death and the meaning of life, but possibly back to this argument of Schopenhauer's, particularly in the case of Levin. Tolstoy's recurring fear of death is the struggle of reconciling reason with happiness and hope (154-5).

2.2 The Religious Argument

Gustafson champions the idea that Eastern Orthodox tradition is the main spiritual and philosophical influence on Tolstoy's thinking, not only during the time of writing *Anna Karenina*, but throughout this life and career. This influence could easily be lost on a Western reader, whose contact with Eastern Orthodox tradition is minimal at best. And according to Gustafson this is often the end result when even scholarly readers interact with the text. This is evident when he states that his purpose is to look at Tolstoy with analysis "based on...an original reconstruction of

Tolstoy's theology seen in the light of Eastern Christian thought rather than under the influence of those Western thinkers many believe are formative" (xiv).

It cannot be denied that Eastern Orthodoxy and its traditions have an influence on *Anna Karenina*. The Church plays a major factor in each of the three primary storylines, and several of Levin's most formative moments were played out in part with aid of the Church. The obvious example is the confession to the priest before marrying Kitty, but there is also the death of his brother, Nikolai, and the icon at the birth of his son, Mitya. This last is a particularly good example that might be overlooked by a Western reader, because "Russian Orthodoxy involves above all the holding up of the right images for the believers to contemplate" (Gustafson, xi). The importance of retrieving the icon while Kitty is in labor both for Kitty and for Levin's spiritual experience of the moment is a subtle one, but the passage would speak volumes to someone familiar with this tradition.

2.3 A Compromise

Any man's philosophy is inextricable from all experiences and influences that touched upon that philosophy in one way or another. Tolstoy's spiritual philosophy was unquestionably touched by Rousseau, Schopenhauer, and the traditions of the Russian Orthodox Church. The influences of each of these sources can be seen within *Anna Karenina*, which is why scholars who went looking for the influences were able to find them. However, just as each of these influences is present, none of them is the answer to definitively understanding the spiritual philosophy of the novel. All three must be considered to achieve a careful, considerate reading of the

novel, and that is what will be attempted in this consideration of Tolstoy's spiritual philosophy, especially prevalent through Levin's struggle.

3. A Brief Outline

Following the logical order laid out by the questions in the first section of this introduction, the chapters will cover each problem and its related questions in turn. This will begin with issues of structure of the novel, followed by a discussion on the title, then the spiritual philosophy in general, followed by the epigraph. The range of scenes from the novel to be discussed throughout will be introduced in the discussion of structure. Similarly, characters relevant to the discussion will be introduced within the structure-based chapter and be brought up throughout.

4. Conclusions

The conclusions to these discussions will be addressed more thoroughly within their respective chapters. Briefly, conclusions reached indicate that the novel does not contain a specific plot, but rather an explication of the way of living well, by showing both ways of living well and ways of not living well, in conjunction. The novel does not end after the suicide because the story, the complete picture of living well, has not finished.

Perhaps a more controversial conclusion I reach is that the novel, *Anna Karenina*, is improperly titled thus. This decision leads from the conclusion that the explanations for the title by previous scholars have proved unsatisfactory, as well as from the decision that the style of the title does not structurally suit the novel. Along with these conclusions, there will be offered possible titles which would have been more suitable for the novel.

The conclusions of spiritual philosophy are difficult to summarize succinctly, but they will focus upon the spiritual revelation of Levin in Book VIII, and its importance and relation to the rest of the novel. This will continue the discussion of why, as the first chapter concludes, the story is not over after the suicide, and what is accomplished by Book VIII in conjunction with the novel as a whole.

My final conclusions will be in relation to the epigraph, tying in earlier conclusions. The epigraph is explored with its connections to the conclusions on spiritual philosophy discussed in the prior chapter. It is also discussed with the consideration of structural conclusions, that the epigraph is inextricably linked to the issues of how to live well, and accordingly what not living well can look like and why it is not living well. The epigraph is a lens through which the reader experiences the novel, and this epigraph's message on vengeance, at the beginning, warns against taking matters into one's own hands (such as suicide) and also that sin will be punished. At the end of the novel, as the reader looks back on the epigraph, it gives a key to living rightly, namely avoiding judgment of oneself and others that vengeance for wrongdoing is out of the hands of both observer and the one taking the action in question. Vengeance and judgment belong to God alone.

Chapter 1: Structural Concerns

1. Considerations of Basic Structure

Stories have a beginning, middle, and end. Novels are a type of story, and they have a main plot, and any other plotlines that result are secondary plots. Secondary plots serve to further the main plot and act as interesting and entertaining diversions for the reader from the main plot.

These are the sorts of things drilled into the heads of readers as they learn how to read novels for more than just pleasure. As with many types of basic learning, it is oversimplified and even detrimental if the reader is never taught to grow out of it. Many readers never do leave basic learning in regards to literature and the nature of a story, and as they are often casual readers they have no need to do so.

In reality, novels are complex creations, and the best of them might have a beginning, middle, and end. A novel can have two or even three main plots, equally important to the purpose of the novel. So-called and actual secondary plots can be just as essential for the purpose of the novel as a primary plot.

Many of the greatest works of art cannot be judged by basic structural considerations, certainly not at the level of basic learning. *Anna Karenina* is one such complex work. Structural confusion and concerns have existed since the novel's publication, as evidenced by an unpublished letter written by poet A. A. Fet, a friend of Tolstoy's, in response to the *Russian Herald's* refusal to publish Book VIII of the novel as they had with the previous seven books (Orwin, 177). The *Herald's* reasoning for

refusing to publish Book VIII was not structural, but political. By not publishing the final book, however, the *Herald* essentially made the statement that the novel was complete with the famed suicide scene.

The structure of the novel is tight and complex, sometimes feeling as though it is weaving some sort of story and idea tapestry for the reader to admire. It, according to Andrew Kaufman, recreates “the sense of entrapment felt by many of the characters themselves” in its tightness (23). This is a good image, and perhaps even a truth, but it gets to the core of how complicated the novel is. Alexandrov points out that “The novel’s structural design is subtler than one dependent on ‘metronymic’ relations such as physical or even psychic causality, consanguinity, friendship, antipathy, and the like” (105). This is an important point, because it reminds us that the storyline of Stiva and Dolly is not simply in the novel to bring the other two major storylines together through friendships and familial relationships, although it certainly accomplishes this. There is a deeper, stronger importance for Stiva’s storyline, hence why it takes up roughly a fifth of the novel (Morson, 38). All of these storylines are equally important to the overall story that Tolstoy is telling. Indeed, even the parts that do not easily fit into one of the three main storylines are important parts of the story. Henry James puts it best when he says that he “cannot see what is meant by talking as if there were parts of a novel which is the story and a part of it which for mystical reasons is not” (755).

1.1 Scenes and Events

The idea dividing a novel into a series of events is one way of looking at the story and piecing it into chunks easier than the whole to analyze. A novel can be sorted out into ideas and concepts, themes and symbols that lend to a critical approach that can often be

missed in first reading. The other major way to divide a novel is into scenes, events, that can be handled separately or in comparison with each other. Morson says that “What makes a history is eventful difficult” (35). This implies to some extent that the story is contained within difficult events, that the story of *Anna Karenina* is a story of difficulties. What, then, is to be said of the quiet moments of the novel, the ones where mowing occurs, where Laska leads the humans in hunting snipe? Henry James insists that all of this is part of the story, is equally important to the history. “There is no impression of life, no manner of seeing it, and feeling it, to which the plan of the novelist may not offer a place (756). This certainly explains why Tolstoy is justified in writing the point of view of the dog, however briefly, to give the reader a different way of looking at the characters she interacts with – particularly Stiva and Levin.

It is, ironically, also Morson who defines *Anna Karenina* as not only a realist novel, but a very specific kind of realist novel that expresses this idea about the daily quiet and its importance rather well. He terms it a prosaic novel, and “for these novels, grand drama and ecstatic moments do not make a life good. Life is an everyday affair, the sum of total unremarkable, daily happenings defines its quality” (Morson, 28). This concept of the prosaic novel as applied to *Anna Karenina* makes some very important shifts to the typical reading of the novel. It is no longer a novel with a dramatic heroine, but the playground of more ordinary creatures of heroism. In fact, Dolly and Levin are the only candidates as heroes under the auspices of the prosaic genre. He continues to say that “Prosaic novels redefine heroism as the right kind of ordinary living and sainthood as small acts of thoughtfulness that are barely perceived” (Morson, 29). Under this

definition, it seems that the hero of *Anna Karenina* is what Levin grows to be by the final chapters, when he discovers what the right kind of ordinary living actually means.

Orwin's logic about novels and the genre she places this novel into – drama – would lead us away from both Levin and Dolly as potential heroes. “Novels,” she argues, “occur when people do not moderate their passions (Orwin, 179). In this, at least, she seems to be right. To have any sort of story, there must be incidents that cause tension with the ideas the story is proliferating. A novel requires people to behave in ways contrary to conventional ideas of living rightly, and then how the story interacts with their decisions, with their failure to moderate passions and behaviors according to convention, determines the philosophy of the novel in question. Orwin decides that *Anna Karenina* is a drama, and “Drama, for Tolstoy, was therefore ultimately a didactic genre...conflicting sides speak their pieces fully and as forcefully as possible” (178). Tolstoy, if using *Anna Karenina* as a drama, uses the conflicting ideals and behaviors of the two main stories in order to teach the reader how to live well. This is a rather compelling argument for drama, as the reader follows Levin's journey to his own discovery of the beginnings of how to live well throughout the novel, each of his experiences and decisions a lesson on the path.

The further decision Orwin reaches about Levin and Dolly, however, is harder to defend with a complex understanding of the novel. Because of her statement on the nature of novels, she argues that “Levin's successful marriage, and even Dolly's unsuccessful one, inasmuch as she holds the family together, cannot be the subject of a novel” (Orwin, 179). Apart from the fact that conflict and tension within a novel can come about in many complex ways that can certainly allow such marriages to be the

subject of a novel – for who is to say that the passions not being moderated need to belong to main characters or even heroes? – this consideration dampens the heroic nature of Levin and Dolly’s existence in the novel, or at least within their marriages. The fact that Levin’s storyline is afforded equal time and space as the Vronksy-Karenina-Karenin storyline suggests that it is key to the subject of the novel, the tension of the novel, which need not be about marriages at all, but rather a complex study of living rightly, within marriage certainly, but also outside of it.

1.2 Ideas and Concepts

A novel need not be analyzed in terms of events per se, but as a discussion of ideas. Novels are a container to disseminate ideas of how to live well in a variety of circumstances, and comprehensive novels such as *Anna Karenina*, covering a variety of life situations, can also give a guiding philosophy for living well more generally, from day to day and in all the situations of life. This can be achieved both with the Orwin-supported genre of drama and in Morson’s suggestion of a prosaic novel. The key to which genre is being utilized lies in how Tolstoy teaches us to live well. “What an author imagines the world to be is inextricably linked with *how* the author represents the author represents the world to his reader” (Kaufman, 24). The ideas and philosophy being discussed in *Anna Karenina* are woven throughout the story, at every turn, although carefully and without seeming contrived.

Anna Karenina as a dramatic novel could use foreshadowing to further the work and its concepts. Indeed, foreshadowing is a commonly used dramatic device. Yet the characters often find, when seeing symbols and designs in the world around them, that they are quite frequently wrong. The most obvious is Anna’s regular misinterpretations of

things in the world around her, like the nightmare she was sure foreshadowed her dying in childbirth. The nightmare is actually the strongest evidence for foreshadowing, if it is taken to be – as the meeting of Anna and Vronsky at the train station often is – a foreshadowing of her later suicide. What is more likely is that the dream, as dreams often are, is actually a twist of Anna’s psyche and memories, and she takes it to be an oracle of her future when she decides to commit suicide. She uses it as a guide, almost an excuse, but it is unlikely that Tolstoy treated it as a guide or foreshadowing. This leads away from drama as the genre of the novel, and closer to the prosaic realism in Morson’s suggestion. *Anna Karenina*, “as a realist novel avoids foreshadowing as a device” (Fort, 12), and as a prosaic novel even more so. The evidence is in how the characters’ attempts to interpret the symbols around them in a fatalistic manner always proves the wrong way of looking at and ordering their lives.

The themes and concepts explored on the path to understanding how to live well are contained in a variety of crucial moments across the novel. Such moments include the disruption of Dolly and Stiva’s married life at the beginning of the novel, the death of Levin’s brother in the middle of the novel, and Levin’s quest for faith which consumes the latter half of the novel. Various scenes and characters are peppered throughout to illustrate the ideas and philosophy of the work, including each of these scenes, the dinner with Stiva and Levin toward the beginning, the characters already mentioned above, and Kitty.

Stiva is perhaps one of those most important characters in framing an informed reading of *Anna Karenina*. As many other characters are emblems of flaws within the two primary characters, or of the various institutions in which they move, Stiva is very much

an emblem of the flaws of society. He is an incomplete picture of society's flaws, as any well-developed character would be, but the fact that he has no ideas of his own but the ones which are in fashion is immediately suggestive that he serves as a regular reminder of liberal society. His wife, Dolly, is connected to the conservative values of society, not quite the country life that Levin idealizes and prefers, but still embracing the values that the country embraces – of family and the church and other such conservative institutions. That the pair is in constant conflict is no great surprise, but why begin with their conflict? Morson argues that “the novel begins with Dolly and Stiva because they define themes essential to the work's meaning” (38). To ascertain whether or not this is true, it is of course necessary to decide what the work's meaning is, but if one considers that the tensions between liberalism and conservatism, as well as the flaws of society as a whole, are woven into the storylines of both Levin and Anna and are thereby critical to understanding the novel, Morson is absolutely correct.

It is certainly no accident that we begin not only with these two characters and their woes, but that our very first line of the novel expresses their issue and the issue surrounding much of the conflict of the novel without drawing judgments or stating morals. Simply, happy families are all the same, and unhappy families are all different in their unhappiness. The words differ depending on the translation, but the meaning is unchanged in its simple profundity. “The aphorism about happy and unhappy families was originally conceived...as an epigraph to the first part,” Orwin tells us (179). Tolstoy decided it would be better as part of the novel proper, using it as an introduction to Stiva's problems with Dolly. But it does, in fact, serve as a precursor for the first part, and sets up the conflicts mostly based on family interaction and its various types of

failings. By taking it out of epigraph form, however, and placing it within the text, it informs the reader as an integral part of the novel, and is not framed as referring to the first part only.

Another concept that has its significance pointed to with its structural placement and use is that of death, fear of death, and understanding of death which the characters interact with throughout. As Kaufman, among others, points out, the only titled chapter in the entirety of the novel is “DEATH,” which “appears at the structural center of the work, when the opposite trajectories of the two couples are firmly established” (167). In this chapter, Kitty is revealed to be pregnant and Levin is embarking on building the family life he has begun, but he is confronted with the fear of his lack of understanding of death that has haunted him since the first time he encounters his dying brother, Nikolai, at the beginning of the novel. It continues to haunt him well after Nikolai is dead, until Levin can deal with his spiritual concerns at their very core. “Death serves not only as the structural center but also the philosophical fulcrum of the novel” – unsurprisingly in a work that contains two explicit deaths and three characters – at least – considering suicide (Kaufman, 167). Death, then, is expressly connected to the question explored in the second half of the novel, which is bookended with discussions of Levin’s faith.

Gustafson draws the line for where the second half begins in a slightly different spot from Kaufman: “The second half of *Anna Karenina* begins with the question of Levin’s faith” (Gustafson, 137). He is referring to Levin’s confession to the Orthodox priest, which is required of him before marrying Kitty. In spite of his reluctance, this episode causes him to think about his faith and doubt differently in light of the life he is about to start. As this scene with the priest and the chapter in which Nikolai dies serve

similar purposes within Levin's spiritual journey, albeit with different tones and lenses, wherever the line is drawn for the beginning of the second half is irrelevant. The second half begins with a discussion of Levin's faith, either facing marriage or death. The second half ends with a discussion of Levin's faith as well, the culmination of his spiritual journey throughout the novel, his discovery of how to live well and defeat his suicidal leanings, to take true joy in the life he has built. This structural technique makes it very clear that Levin's journey is the one that drives the second half of the novel. Perhaps dramatically we can be fooled, as Anna is, into believing that she is the heroine, but she is the heroine of a novel that does not exist, a novel about the tragedy of her situation, focused on her fate and its inevitability. Her suicide is encased within a portion of the book that begins and ends with Levin's spiritual journey, his happiness in married life, and his decisions to live well and fight both his fear of death and his bout of suicidal thoughts. The ideas and concepts of the novel pertain to Anna, but it is not her that the reader should look to for the essential answers.

2. Considerations of Plot

If the structure of the novel was not complicated enough without it, there has been confusion over plot since the very beginning of *Anna Karenina's* readership. When the *Russian Herald* originally published the novel, it was not the familiar eight-book structure readers know today, but in thirteen installments "the fourteenth, corresponding to Part VIII, was published separately" (Schultze, 44). The way that these installments were split separated far more regularly, with "few installments based on the principle of juxtaposition" of the storylines of Anna and Levin, leading readers to believe that *Anna Karenina* was more "two loosely linked novels" than a single work (Schultze, 47). The

juxtaposition is what the coherence of the novel as a single work depends upon, so the confusion is certainly understandable, and somehow the confusion over what the “plot” is has not only continued, but has intensified. “Critics do not agree whether there are two plots, three, or none at all” (Schultze, 17).

The concept of two plots is fairly obvious: the two major storylines of Anna and Levin would each consist of their own plot, and the two interweave to form the novel as a whole. Three plots includes, as Morson does when dividing the novel, Dolly and Stiva’s story as its own plot (Morson, 38). Those who say there is no plot at all have typically argued that this is such a realistic novel that it is closer to a slice of life, and life does not have plot. Life has events, but there is no plot, which is a structural consideration (Schultze, 17).

Sydney Schultze immediately discounts the concept Morson champions of three plots, and for a very mathematical reason: “Of all two hundred and thirty-nine chapters of *Anna Karenina*, one is completely devoted to Dolly, and only five to Stiva” (18). How can this be when Morson argues that twenty percent of the book is devoted to them collectively? Obviously, Morson and Schultze are qualifying “devoted” differently, and coming up with vastly different results that agree with how they each see the novel. Statistics prove only moderately useful in a case like this, for as in many things, they can be easily twisted to show us what we want or expect to see. I believe it is safe to stay that Stiva and Dolly’s storyline is a very important sub-plot at worst, if we believe there are any plots at all.

Yet it also does not seem reasonable, in a novel so carefully and intricately structured, to insist that there is no plot, or rather, no structural consideration, on the basis

of the novel being a slice of life. It is a highly realistic novel, to be sure, perhaps the most realistic ever written, but to say that there is no structure at all is a heavy claim, considering how well the various storylines interconnect and interact. There is an indication, rather, that it has a delicate, impressively fashioned structural consideration.

The final option is two plots, two structures surrounding the storylines of Anna and Levin, and this is both the most obvious and most popular theory. This theory tells us that the story is about what the populace assumes it is about (namely, an adulteress who commits suicide), and also about a man who struggles to find peace of mind while his happy, almost idyllic life unfolds throughout the novel. I would argue that this is not, actually, what the novel is about. Both of these storylines occur, and if it is useful for a reader to consider them as plots for the purpose of making charts and teaching themselves how to read *Anna Karenina* as a novel, then I will not try to take that away. However, it is a novel about a way of living well, the philosophy of doubt and internal struggle in order to find happiness in everyday life. This philosophy is not a plot, but it encompasses both storylines, in the case of Levin successfully teaching himself to live well, and in the case of Anna being ignored and pushed aside, abandoned for a vengeful suicide. It is in the way these stories interact, in their particulars, that the philosophy can be fully understood by a careful reader, and not simply misread as a simple moral-of-the-story.

3. Book VIII

The structure of *Anna Karenina* would be vastly different without Book VIII after the famed suicide scene. This was how early readers experienced the novel, and for them the simplistic, boiled-down version of the novel's point might have rung true: "Both [Anna and Levin] live morally: one chooses evil and dies, while the other chooses good

and lives” (Orwin, 178). The two main storylines are driven by characters that have the capability of making moral choices, of thinking about their actions and the implications of them. This is important, as this is a quality that not all – in fact very few – of the characters actually possess, as is instantly clear when the reader meets Stiva and learns of his many instinctive beliefs and behaviors and all the trouble they get him and those around him into. Stiva does not change by the end, and he is incapable of doing so because he does not live morally. The two characters who exhibit the most change are Anna and Levin, which is why they become the central characters to the novel. They struggle with their spiritual and philosophical choices because they are aware of them, because they think about their lives, because they do not merely act on instinct.

Anna dies; Levin lives. She chooses “evil,” he chooses “good.”

If it were all so simple this would not only be one of the most highly regarded novels in all of literature, but it would also not be a novel so little agreed upon by its various critics and scholars. Anna’s choices are complex, difficult, and not necessarily evil. Levin’s choices are similarly complex and difficult, although it would be fairly safe to call them good on a variety of levels. Without Book VIII, we do not have the final revelation of Levin, we do not see his inner turmoil resolved, and so we do not know how to fully consider the actions of either character. This ending is absolutely essential. Endings contain the most crucial revelations and truths, for Tolstoy, of optimism (Kaufman, 19), and if we are to take *Anna Karenina* as a novel of the triumph of optimism, of something worth living for and a way to live well, then we must have the final book. Ending the novel with the suicide does not give us the picture of living well,

which is the whole purpose of the novel. It is not merely structurally significant, but a structural and philosophic necessity.

Chapter 2: Concerns of the Title

1. Previous Defenses

Orwin's retelling of A. A. Fet's unpublished letter regarding *Anna Karenina* in its early days discusses not only the structure, but also jokingly suggests that the title does not clearly delineate what is happening for readers, and he offers instead the absurd suggestion of renaming it *Karenina, or the Adventures of a Lost Lamb, and the Stubborn Landowner Levin, or the Moral Triumph of a Seeker after Truth* (177). The joke is a fairly obvious one, but the best jokes are always grounded in a sort of truth. Whether or not Fet would have actually preferred something other than *Anna Karenina*, he clearly sensed that there was something unsatisfying about the title.

Every scholar I consulted had a defense of the title, and almost everyone was different, in small or even drastic ways. Orwin's defense is firmly tied to her classification of *Anna Karenina* as a dramatic novel. Such a novel requires a very specific sort of hero or heroine, and "He named the book after Anna because she, of all the characters in the book including Levin, most fully meets the specifications for such a heroine" (Orwin, 179). If *Anna Karenina* were a novel in the vein of *Effi Briest* or *Madame Bovary*, as many readers believe it to be, this would be the end of the discussion of the title. It follows in the tradition perfectly. Anna certainly fashions herself after such a heroine, and imagines herself in such a novel. The very fact that she imagines herself thus, however, is a very important clue that she is not in such a novel, and is not even quite such a heroine. Orwin's admission that she "most fully meets" the mark, rather than

fully, points to the very flaw in her argument. *Anna Karenina* is not a dramatic novel, and therefore need not be named along the tradition of dramatic novels about adulterous society women.

Kaufman also tries to argue on behalf of the title with some measure of consideration of dramatic plot, but in a slightly different vein. He says that the novel is not named for Levin (as some offer as an alternative due to his often being the discussed as a possible hero in place of Anna) because he is the noble minority voice and not the main dramatic plotline (Kaufman, 150). Kaufman recognizes that Levin's storyline is of at least equal importance as Anna's. "The novel named after her ends not with her death but with the growth of Levin's and Kitty's family in the countryside. The final note in Tolstoy's novels is always one of optimism and the assertion of life's continuity" (Kaufman, 19). Instead of arguing that Anna is the heroine, he argues that Levin cannot be the titular character because he is something of the voice of truth in the wilderness, contemplating unpopular questions with the majority characters and discovering equally unpopular answers.

This is an excellent reason why the novel should not be named for Levin. It does nothing further, however, to explain why the novel should be named for Anna except pointing out that her story is the center of drama. This is a valid point. In heavily philosophic novels, however, when novels are not named for the hero for these reasons, or reasons like it, the novel does not regularly then become titled for a dramatic center of the novel. Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, for example, has its heroes on its fringes, well and away from the moral majorities. It discusses themes so difficult that it is named for no one, but rather the concepts upon which it turns, upon which its philosophy

is based. *Anna Karenina* needn't have been named for any character at all, and then might have better complied with the issue Kaufman raises.

Schultze's study of *Anna Karenina*'s structural considerations leads to a different, perhaps more popularly recognizable defense of the title: "The best reason for the title is the obvious one: the novel since its inception was the story of Anna, and despite the growth in size and importance of the Levin plot, it never supplants the Anna plot or even ranks in reader interest equal to the Anna plot" (Schultze, 12). This is, perhaps, the least convincing defense of them all. What it suggests is both that the novel began about Anna and therefore should be named for her, and that it is Anna's story because her story is never "supplanted" by Levin's, nor are readers as interested in Levin.

Firstly, while it might be true that Levin's storyline never "supplants" Anna's, the idea that one of them must dominate over the other assumes that the novel must be named for one of them. As the novel isn't expressly about either of them, but about both of their experiences, choices, and struggles, there is nothing to suggest that in naming the novel Tolstoy had to effectively choose a side.

Secondly, the idea that reader interest (or when it was being named, potential reader interest) ought to be considered in choosing the title is vaguely absurd. That is not to say that a title with some amount of artistry to attract a reader should be disregarded, but it is more important to create a title that will help the reader understand the sort of novel they are about to read and what it is generally about than to point out what they will be most interested in upon reading the novel. If such considerations were made, it is probable that a great many novels and works of art would have to be retitled. The purpose of including things like titles and epigraphs is to frame the reader's mind for what is

about to be disseminated to them through the novel, and if the title is instead used to pander to what they would have concluded wrongly on their own, the novel has been conscionably mistitled.

2. Possible Defense

The fact that I was unable to find a satisfactory defense of the title within my research does not necessarily mean that it is the wrong title. It could simply be that the proper defense has yet to be written, or that it is hidden away in some source I did not encounter. Therefore the next step in confronting the title of the novel is to attempt to determine whether a satisfactory defense could be found.

My first step was to consider that what titling the novel as *Anna Karenina* can and does accomplish. Among the things previously discussed, namely aligning the reader with Anna's storyline and treating her as the center of the novel, it also does to some extent what Orwin suggests in leading the reader to think of the novel as a tale of a society woman caught in a dramatic adultery. Anna certainly thinks of herself in this way, and a reader led to sympathize with Anna is not difficult to persuade on this point. Whether or not it is permissible or even expected for the reader to sympathize with Anna is a question that could lead to a book in and of itself. What is certain is that Tolstoy uses regular overturning of what Anna thinks is her fate in order to display how she is not such a heroine, and that this is not such a novel.

Novels that comment on a genre can certainly be named in accordance with the genre they discuss and critique. Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is an excellent example of this. Austen's novel is a critique of the gothic romance, commenting on the genre throughout, and follows in the gothic romantic tradition of naming the novel after the

place where the novel is centered. The problem is, though, that in critiquing the genre, *Northanger Abbey* becomes a part of the gothic romance genre, not moving outside of it. It is the same as how *Gawain and the Green Knight* manages to both critique the genre of chivalric romance while remaining very much within that very genre. This is commonly the fate of novels which critique a genre, and so their being named after the fashion of that which they are commenting on is less based on their status as critic and more on their status as member.

If *Anna Karenina* could be said to be a dramatic novel because of its critiques of them, the title would be perfect. Indeed, this defense of the title, which is really a continuation of Orwin's defense taking into consideration the commentary nature of the dramatic storyline, is the best one I have been able to construct, and the only one that succeeds in convincing me for even a moment that perhaps the title is a correct one. If Anna's storyline were the focal point of the novel, as it was at the novel's conception, this would be the definitive argument. However, with the inclusion of the equally significant Levin storyline, Anna's drama is no longer truly a focal point, and so the novel moves beyond the criticism, which is a part of a greater whole, and does not fall into the genre of drama.

3. Retitling the Novel

To undergo any project of attempting to retitling a novel is always somewhat of a flight of fancy. Typically, attempts to rename books have some sort of agenda, be they comedic, theoretical, or socio-political. The exercise is intended to reframe how the reader interacts with and imagines the novel. Often, the result says more about the person engaging in the practice than about the novel itself.

With these pitfalls in mind, I attempted to find a handful of suitable suggestions for possible improved titles for *Anna Karenina*. I began by thinking of other realist novels of its era – those which were highly philosophic and those which were highly prosaic. In the realm of philosophical novels of the nineteenth century I considered *Fathers and Sons* by Ivan Turgenev, *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, and *War and Peace*. Another realist novel which is somewhere on the line of philosophical/psychological and prosaic is George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Although *Middlemarch* is perhaps the closest to *Anna Karenina* in its nature, it would be difficult to use its title as a model for retitling *Anna Karenina*. Perhaps if there were a location – be it a town, region, or estate – that were emblematic of the message of living well or of Levin's journey to discovering this message, it would be plausible to follow Eliot's example and use it as the title, but there is no such place within Tolstoy's masterpiece.

The three Russian philosophical-realist novels follow a pattern of Noun-and-Noun, also seen in Jane Austen's romantic novels of the same era, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, to the same effect. This format allows the author to highlight two nouns, two ideas or concepts which either complement or juxtapose each other at the very core of the novel's aims. This prepares the reader with two points of consideration from the onset of the novel, even if other points grow out from them as the novel progresses. Such titles give no promises for a hero of any sort, and in the case of the Austen novels can even point out the flaws of excess inherent in those who would be heroes by the end of the novel.

Upon deciding that the Noun-and-Noun structure would be most suitable for the replacement title, I then began thinking of what nouns to place into the structure. The first

things that came to mind were *God and Self*, *Town and Country*, and *Family and Society*. These seemed a bit on the narrow end, and then I came up with the more cosmic notions of *God and Man*, and *Life and Death*. When discussing these titles with friends who had also read the novel to see how they were struck by them, *Town and Country* was an immediate hit. I confess, I was also partial to the sound of *Town and Country*, but it has its problems. The main issue with *Town and Country* is that while it has style and covers the concerns of the novel too narrowly, as the current title does. The conflict between the town and the country is very important to the understanding of the novel, but it is not essential in the way that crime and punishment are essential in *Crime and Punishment*.

Family and Society and *God and Self* have similar issues in regard to their substance within the novel. Especially with *Family and Society*, it gets to a point in the novel, but not the novel as a whole. *God and Self* is perhaps a bit better, except that Anna's self and God hardly interact. It is almost too abstract for her storyline, and too obvious in Levin's. Not to mention, the people I discussed these with disliked them stylistically, pointing out that titles for novels should have some sort of artistic quality to them which these lack. They would, perhaps, be better suited to a treatise than a novel.

When I decided to think of bigger concepts, more complete things, I came up with *God and Man*, and then with *Life and Death*. Testing them again, I found that *Life and Death* was the preferred title of my friends, although both are large enough to encompass the purposes of the novel and yet still specific enough to be very much essential to the philosophy Tolstoy has laid out for us.

God and Man is in the vein, stylistically, of *Fathers and Sons* in that it tells us who is being discussed without providing artificial importance to any one character or set

of characters. Perhaps its greatest flaw is that it sets God up in a far more active role than he ever takes in *Anna Karenina*. It, too, has a treatise-feel like *God and Self*, although is slightly more artistic.

Life and Death is closer to *War and Peace*, or *Crime and Punishment*, large, sweeping concepts that oppose each other. It has an artistic ring to it. In a story filled with death, thoughts of death, fears of death. It seems fitting that death be one of the nouns. Life is not only a direct counterpart to death, but it is equally extensively explored. Life and living well is the positive goal of the novel, and death is the negative goal. If living well cannot be acquired, death must be acquired. If one wants to believe in the two-plot theory, this title could easily be a descriptor of the two heroes, of their fates. If one wants to believe in no plot at all, the title is merely a representation of the struggles Tolstoy's characters face on their daily journeys. For characters who live morally, these questions are of constant and pressing consideration, and only through considering life and death can Levin truly reach his conclusions in Book VIII.

There is probably a flaw in it, some way of looking at the title of *Life and Death* which does not suit *Anna Karenina* properly. Perhaps, as my own greatest concern leads me to suspect, it is too grand, too large of a scale. On the other hand, it is no grander than *War and Peace* or *Crime and Punishment*, and I can think of no book more deserving of a grand, cosmic title than *Anna Karenina*. Given another six years to read, study, and contemplate *Anna Karenina*, I might find a better title, or more concrete reasons why *Life and Death* is not quite right, but for now it is the best I have to offer. I feel far more comfortable with its suitability for the novel than I do with the present title.

Chapter 3: Spiritual Philosophy

1. Levin's Character

Of the two storylines, there exists one dramatic and one prosaic. Levin's storyline contains moments of quiet and underlying tension of searching, of longing, and of happiness with the life he lives. There are dramatic moments in his story, most of them consisting of births, deaths, weddings.... The usual traditions that define the cycle of life and make a person remember that they belong to something bigger than themselves. His search for meaning is the backbone of the novel, and he is the only character capable of the kind of conversion Tolstoy shows us in *Anna Karenina*. Therefore it is essential, in understanding the spiritual philosophy of *Anna Karenina*, to understand how it relates to Konstantin Levin, and what his quest actually is.

When we are first introduced to Levin, it is as a suitor to Dolly's youngest and only unmarried sister, Kitty. This courtship serves for much of the dramatic tension on Levin's otherwise undramatic storyline, but it is also an essential part of his spiritual journey. Schopenhauer tells us that the "ordinary man places his life's happiness in the things external to him, in property, rank, wife and children, friends, society, and the like, so that when he loses them or finds them disappointing, the foundation of happiness is destroyed" (*The Wisdom of Life and Other Essays*, 29). We learn that Levin is not only a man looking for marriage, but as we get to know him he also becomes a staunch supporter of old aristocratic values, and a tireless landowner who is constantly attempting to improve upon the estates left to him by his parents. Levin, in many ways is the

ordinary man Schopenhauer describes, looking for his happiness in things and institutions around him.

Yet to call Levin ordinary would be misleading. His idealizing of the things around him has caused him to latch onto Dolly's family, falling in love with each of the daughters until there is only one left unmarried. Once he falls in love with Kitty, his imagination invents her as the perfect wife, and marriage is something sacred to him, rather like it is for Rousseau's Priest (2). Gustafson argues that, "Unbeknown to [Levin], his mission to find love is a quest for faith" (135). Perhaps Levin has not fully considered it, but I do not think it is fully unknown to him that he searches for faith in his love for Kitty. He consistently attributes to her a spiritual, supernatural quality, calling her "purity itself" (453) and his "holy of holies" (520). Gustafson even points out that it is Levin who says the novel's first prayer, and it is in Kitty's presence that he does so (132). At the very least, there is some sort of subconscious association with Kitty and his salvation, with Kitty and a higher power. She is an angelic mystery to him, and her purity leads him to some of the first internal agony we see him experience in the novel.

When Levin has dinner with Stiva and discusses his fear of courting such a pure being, as well as his conviction that he must court her in spite of his fears, it is his own impurity he points to as the cause of his turmoil. "It is awful that we – who are comparatively old and have pasts...not of love but of sin..." (*Anna Karenina*, 36). Levin's sins haunt him in this moment, as they do later in his relationship with Kitty, to the point that he actually gives his journals so that she can fully understand his life before her. Levin's sins are primarily spiritual. He has bodily sins, which are what he refers to when he is talking to Stiva (namely fornication), but these bodily sins, which are the chief

sins of many other characters, are only a small sliver of what plagues Levin. His sins are those of pride, excessive doubt, and perhaps even idolatry where Kitty is concerned. In regards to Kitty, he takes solace in a prayer, which is to him in this situation merely a bit of good advice and solace to someone who feels unworthy (*Anna Karenina*, 36).

Levin is a man in search of something, and while for him it might at first appear strictly that he is in search of a wife, even he is quickly jarred out of that point of view by two very important things: he is turned away by Kitty, who fancies herself in love with Vronsky; and he visits his wayward, dying brother Nikolai, who both gives him a sneak preview of dying and death and reminds him what doubt and inner turmoil can lead to if left unchecked. “For Tolstoy the road to truth begins with unceasing examination of the self” (Kaufman, 2), and aside from reasons of story unrelated to Levin, Kitty’s refusal forces Levin to look at other aspects of his life, namely matters of faith that have plagued him internally, for what we are lead to believe has been a very long time. On this same visit to Moscow, Levin not only is refused by Kitty, but he makes two very unsuccessful visits to his brothers, Sergei Ivanovich and Nikolai, and it is these visits which give him fodder to examine himself after he has fled Kitty’s refusal and refocused himself on country life.

Gustafson points out that “The failed relationships with his brothers are the emblems of Levin’s flaws” (135). Levin visits Sergei Ivanovich, the famous scholar, in order to tell him of his decision to propose to Kitty, but after the visit goes very differently from how he would have wished he decides not to, and what it serves as for the reader is an opportunity to see Levin interacting with philosophy. Levin listens to the arguments his brother has with the scholar who is visiting him, and even tries to interact,

getting to the real heart of both what they are discussing and what plagues him in his spiritual doubts, but he is turned down swiftly, thought of as a bit naïve perhaps for asking questions better left unasked. This is only the first of many discussions Levin has where he is shut out or where he loses an argument.

As Morson tells us, “The fact that Levin loses arguments convicts not the way he thinks, but rather the way intellectuals think” (15). Levin cannot win an argument because he does not hold a position. Intellectual debate, as with philosophic writing that Levin later becomes incredibly frustrated with, requires the participants to have a position and to defend that position, usually through bringing down opposition rather than making some sort of positive point for their own beliefs. Levin doesn’t think that way. His thoughts are organic, arising from his experiences, and not from the study of some particular school of thought (Strakhov, 764). This way of thinking leads to not only lost arguments, but to the constant changing of his position, throughout the novel and also in the middle of conversations. He even trails off in the middle of a sentence and changes his position while at dinner with Stiva because he realizes that to continue as he was talking would be hypocritical (Orwin, 174). This behavior makes many of the characters around him to hold him to a lower intellectual status to his brother, and even to count him as a bit foolish. The reader might even be inclined to agree, but Schopenhauer would applaud Levin for behaving in a natural, even educated way:

In order to make us patient under contradiction, and tolerant of views opposed to our own, nothing is, perhaps, more powerful than the remembrance of how often we have successively held quite opposite views on the same subject, and have changed them quite repeatedly,

sometimes, indeed, within a very short period (*The Wisdom of Life*, 246-8).

Levin, in spite of his natural, intelligent behavior in regard to his own contradictions, has not yet fully grasped the full concept Schopenhauer is addressing here. He is not patient with others, whether or not they are contradictory. He is certainly not tolerant of other views. And a trait he shares with Sergei Ivanovich contributes to this failing. “He sees in [Sergei Ivanovich] his own flaw.... Both turn the human and social problems into intellectual endeavor” (Gustafson, 136). This is, more than anything else, an image of their pride in their own knowledge and intellect. Levin finds he cannot stand this flaw in his brother for long, but still he struggles against his peasants at every turn in attempts to improve their agricultural practices, making it his pet project instead of really listening to the needs of the people who work for him.

Nikolai will be discussed separately, as he has a very profound impact on the development of Levin’s spiritual philosophy, but there is one further consideration of Levin’s character to be addressed at present. Levin does, in fact, marry Kitty and begin the family life he had dreamed of. In order to do so he has to jump through all manner of religious hoops, including a confession with an Orthodox priest. “It was very oppressive for him to be present and take part in any Church ceremonies” (*Anna Karenina*, 398), and this is not because of any dislike for the church, but rather his fear, again, of spoiling something that others take as holy. He has respect for the religion of others, even at this point, and because he is a nonbeliever, he feels that his presence at the Church, his participation in their pageantry, is not only asking him to be false, but it also is an insult to the very practices he must participate in.

These, too, will be examined later, but Levin still undergoes these trials and marries Kitty, and marriage leads him to another important part of his life: fatherhood. The scene in which his son is born is one of the best in the novel, and as far as his character is concerned in particular, it is important to focus on two points. The first of these is that while Kitty is in the agonies of labor, Levin, who is the very picture of a distressed, impatient, and even terrified new father. He cannot help Kitty and he is terrified for her life. He does the only possible thing in that moment: he prays. Not only does he pray, as he does at the beginning of the novel, but Tolstoy tells that he prays “not with his lips only,” that is to say, prays with his whole heart (*Anna Karenina*, 641). This important Christian concept of praying to God with all your heart and soul is emphasized in order to puzzle Levin later, who both finds that he cannot believe in God at a time after this event, but still cannot allow himself to reject these prayers, for the moments he prayed for Kitty’s life, for his son, Mitya’s life, are precious to him in spite of his being a nonbeliever. This tension forces him to face his inconsistencies eventually, as it is a tension that cannot sustain itself forever.

The second essential point for Levin’s character at Mitya’s birth is his revulsion and pity for his son that he feels upon first seeing him, and really right up until the very end of the novel. It is not how he expected to feel for his child, and the feeling terrifies and confuses him. Gustafson explains this well, telling us that Mitya is “the emblem of [Levin’s] own helpless being” (140). Mitya is completely at the mercy of the world around him, and for all of his intellect and physical strength, so is Levin.

2.1 Levin’s Contrast to Stiva

“To him oysters and champagne are the height of existence” (Schopenhauer, *The Wisdom of Life*, 34). Schopenhauer could have easily been describing Stiva when he wrote this, and in fact when he has dinner with Levin at the beginning of the novel these are the very two things he indulges in, in spite of his troubles with Dolly. In fact, Schopenhauer was describing what he considers to be a man without intellectual needs, and this is part of a very derogatory passage about the behavior of such men.

Stiva is, in this scene, set up not only as Levin’s friend and confidant, but also as his exact spiritual opposite. Another Schopenhauer quote could be equally meant for Stiva: “Rich men who are ignorant live for their lusts only, and are like the beasts of the field” (*Religion: A Dialogue and Other Essays*, 61). It does not even require a very careful reader to decide that Stiva fits this description. Stiva wakes up in his study at the very start of the novel from a perfectly lovely dream of hedonism and excess while his wife is agonizing in her bedroom, agonizing because of the position his hedonism and excess has put her in. He is not his sister, thinking through his actions and making choices. “Stiva lives undramatically and contentedly but wrongly moment to moment” (Morson, 36). Anna makes poor moral decisions; Stiva makes no moral decisions.

He really does not make decisions at all, actually. He is a liberal because liberalism suits him:

The Liberal Party said, or rather hinted, that religion was only good as a check on the more barbarous portion of the population; and Oblonsky really could not stand through even a short service without pain in his feet, or understand why anyone should use all that dreadfully high-flown

language about another world while one can live so merrily in this one
(*Anna Karenina*, 6).

This reasoning for aversion to Church activity is very different to Levin's aversion, and is based on his personal comfort rather than the thought that he might offend someone else's religious sensibilities. He is later horrified, when trying to obtain a divorce for his sister from Karenin and his confidant, Lidia Ivanovna, at the thought that they might make him pray over the course of their meeting on the matter. "That would be too stupid!" (*Anna Karenina*, 667). Stiva quotes the Bible at dinner with Levin when it suits him, as he quotes other sorts of work when it suits him. He is not totally spiritually void, but the "peak of Stiva's spirituality is a fleeting compassion" (Orwin, 176), and this compassion is a very important part of his character. It is, perhaps, his saving grace.

Perhaps what could be considered Stiva's mantra, what one could imagine him saying to himself whenever presented with a difficult person, is his line of "They're all human beings, all men, just like us poor sinners" (*Anna Karenina*, 341). This sentiment allows him to interact with people in a way Levin cannot. Levin is a moralist, and he holds his thoughts, discussions, and actions to a higher standard, but he also holds the actions and discussions of others to that same standard. Stiva inspires a shallow goodwill in others, something he has for everyone. Levin occasionally inspires goodwill in others as well, in his moments of joy, but Levin's goodwill is deep, pure, and rooted in love. He cannot inspire this frequently because he does not come to possess it until the end, where Stiva's goodwill is the very essence of his nature and he possesses it completely.

Still, Stiva is not a completely uncomplicated character. He is undoubtedly an adulterer, a hedonist, and not the most thoughtful person. Gustafson would say that this is

society's fault, and that man is not sinful by nature, but is made sinful in society with other men (145). This view has its problems. If society is simply men grouped together and organized into various institutions and pursuits, how can it be more than the sum of its parts? What about this structuring takes men who are not at nature sinful, and teaches them to become sinful?

Whether or not *Anna Karenina* gives us the tools to judge society, it certainly gives us the tools to judge Stiva as a part of society, and even as an emblem of it. On the other hand, Tolstoy does not actually judge Stiva. He presents Stiva to the reader with all of his flaws, but also with his charms and virtues. More importantly, the characters do not seem to judge Stiva, either. Alexandrov thought this particularly interesting: "Dolly becomes reconciled to his philandering, and Levin, who strongly disapproves of libertinage and most of what Stiva loves best, never ceases to look upon him as a close friend" (204). In spite of the fact that he obviously conflicts with some of the very best people in the novel – as Dolly and Levin unquestionably are – they not only continue to associate with him, but Dolly continues to love him in her way, and Levin considers him friend and family, and not only for the sake of his beloved sister-in-law and her children. As puzzling as the friendship between Levin and Stiva is from the beginning, and although they confuse and frustrate each other, they are obviously very close, or as close as Stiva can be with anyone.

"The world in which a man lives shapes itself chiefly by the way in which he looks at it," Schopenhauer says, "and so it proves different to different men" (*The Wisdom of Life*, 4). The world that to Stiva is so perfectly comfortable and pleasant is a place of much stress and discomfort for Levin. Levin looks around and sees things that

need to be improved, things he doesn't understand and feels he must understand, and things that absolutely disgust him and horrify his moral sensibilities. Stiva can look at the very same things and be completely untroubled, and we are not led to believe that they are necessarily right or wrong, for Stiva's acceptance of others is something Levin has to learn to do more of by the end. It is not that simple, not so black-and-white. "Instead of an appeal to principles of right and wrong, we have a situational, or entirely relativized, conception of behavior according to which the best answers to problems will somehow arise by themselves when individuals stop seeking them and simply go on living" (Alexandrov, 204). Stiva has grasped this, and he does not worry much, even when he has much to worry about. He does not try to ponder things he does not understand or fix things that perhaps ought to be fixed, but he lives his life and trusts in the goodness of men to make his life comfortable for him. "Even if the characters and the narrator do not condemn Stiva," Alexandrov continues, "it is possible that he can be judged by someone else – namely the reader" (Alexandrov, 208). Indeed, the reader is almost morally obligated to if not judge Stiva, to at least consider his lack of moral behavior by the end of the novel and compare it with the revelation Levin experiences in Book VIII.

2. Levin's Confession

One of the most profound and important moments of the novel is when Levin is forced to go to confession in order to marry Kitty. He goes to the service and then discusses his sins with the priest, saying that he even doubts the existence of God. Doubt is not necessarily a negative thing. An "attitude of uncertainty and doubt which Descartes declares necessary for the pursuit of truth" (Rousseau, 3) is a hallmark of Levin's character, as well as the starting point for the questioning and searching that eventually

leads him to his final revelation. As with Rousseau's priest, Levin's Orthodox priest does not see doubt as the negative starting point that Levin feels it to be. "The chief question to the priest is not whether one doubts, but whether one seeks faith in spite of doubt" (Morson, 197). This Levin certainly does, and does constantly. It is possibly the weight of this doubt that causes Levin's later leanings to suicide, as "Doubt about the things which it is important for us to know is a state too violent for the human mind: it cannot bear up under it for long" (Rousseau, 3). Perhaps this is why the priest points out that Levin needs to sort out his doubts, and to do so quickly.

In spite of the fact that the priest seems to have an understanding of Levin that even Levin does not have, there is a disconnect between the two. There are many probable reasons for this, but the best one is likely the fact that "Levin felt that it would not be proper to enter into a philosophic discussion with a priest" (*Anna Karenina*, 400), and so when the priest tries to meet with him on an intellectual level Levin shuts down, not wanting to offend the priest or behave improperly. It is not clear whether or not Levin does something positive here, but the priest proves himself to be especially perceptive and clever and changes gears. The priest manages to make progress with Levin when he makes personal appeals. "You are entering upon a time of life, the priest went on, 'when you must choose your path and keep to it'" (*Anna Karenina*, 401). This time of life has little to do with Levin specifically, and everything to do with the fact that he is marrying and having children. As we learn through the various interactions Levin has with other characters, and very especially with his brother-in-law Lvov, who only appears once, it is very important to consider things like the education of children. Lvov tells Levin that he could not have properly managed the education of his own sons without the support of

the church, and “In this novel nothing is more important than raising children” (Morson, 39). Nothing is more important to Levin, either, because children are a part of his idyllic image of what his future ought to look like. The priest strikes the right chord, and “Levin is touched” by the priest’s pointing out the place of faith in the life Levin is about to start. By taking the question out of the realm of philosophy, as well, the priest highlights not only the importance of the questions to Levin’s everyday world, but also sets the precedent that cosmic questions such as the existence of God and the meaning of life need not be considered in the philosophic lens.

3. Levin and Death

Anna Karenina is a novel full of death. Anna’s storyline begins with death, as she meets her brother and Count Vronsky at the train station where a man is killed by the train. It also has her conviction that she will die in childbirth, and when she does not die Vronsky’s attempted suicide. They both survive, but Anna’s downward spiral propels her to commit suicide of her own. After she is gone, Vronsky does what we can fairly safely assume is also an act of suicide by volunteering for the war. He has lost the will to live, and this is a respectable way to kill himself.

Levin’s storyline, similarly, is plagued with considerations of death early on, and most – although not all – of it centers on his brother, Nikolai, who is dying from the very moment we first encounter him in Moscow. Once Nikolai dies, the second half of the novel turns to the effect this has had on how Levin views the world. Nikolai is the “emblem of his own mortality” (Gustafson, 138), and Levin must come to terms with his fear of death to confront the other questions he is tormented by.

3.1 Nikolai

Levin first goes to meet his wayward brother, who is also in Moscow, when he has been freshly rejected by Kitty, on his way out of town and in despair. We are given hints to expect that Nikolai will be in a bad sort of place by the way his brothers discuss him and his choices, but even Levin is a bit shocked at the state in which he finds his brother. He finds him very ill, looking quite like death itself. Nikolai is, in fact, dying. It is likely that he has by this time come to terms with it in some regard, although he struggles until the bitter end, and does not seem to be at peace with the thought of death. It is at this meeting where Levin says one of the most puzzling and perhaps most insensitive things of the whole novel: "We shall understand it better in the next world" (*Anna Karenina*, 84). It is not meant to upset, but soothe the dying man, and perhaps to give Levin a bit of his own comfort. If there is a God and a next world, then there is peace at the end of Nikolai's suffering and the fact that he is dying is only terrible in that it is obviously very painful for him.

Yet this is the sort of thing that a person with faith says to another person with faith. Neither of these brothers are believers, and so the words are either empty attempts at comfort or they are more of those words from the heart, like Levin's prayer at Mitya's birth, that are meant in the moment but do not resonate elsewhere. Either way, they are troubling, and in the midst of an equally troubling visit. Levin and Nikolai cannot get along, and although Levin has made the effort to reach out to his brother after his own great disappointment, it is infinitely clear by Nikolai's behavior that he does not appreciate this gesture. Perhaps he feels that it is charity, as their brother Sergei Ivanovich would likely have behind such a visit, or perhaps he merely is cantankerous at

his brother seeing how far he has fallen. Whatever the reason, there is nothing joyful in the reunion of these brothers.

Their second meeting is when Nikolai comes to pay Levin a visit on his estate. It is hardly better than their first meeting, and Nikolai is still in a very bad way. This meeting reminds us and Levin of Nikolai, of his condition, and makes his path toward once again proposing to Kitty full of a different sort of meaning. Once Nikolai is gone Levin's thoughts are even more plagued by death, and the focus to marry is renewed. "Levin's attachment to the ideal of family reflects his hunger for a meaning to his existence that death cannot destroy" (Kaufman, 155). For a time, once he become engaged to Kitty, and even shortly after marrying her, he has some peace from his thoughts and fears of death, but then he must meet Nikolai again, this time with Kitty. Nikolai, they learn, is dying, and this time it is certain.

Levin and his new wife go to Nikolai and find him in an awful state. Kitty gets to work at making Nikolai more comfortable right away, but Levin is shaken by the situation. "Death is no longer an abstract to Levin; it is something he can see, smell, and touch, yet it remains utterly bewildering" (Kaufman, 168). This meeting is devastating to Levin, not even so much because his brother is about to die as it might have been for anyone else. Nikolai and Levin did not get along, they were not particularly close, and after all, he had been dying for quite some time. There is a profound difference, though, for Levin between the state his brother is now in and the state he was in before. When Nikolai was dying in the previous visits, there was always some entirely false sense of hope, some lie they all half-wanted to believe that he could get better. As Levin watches his wife care for Nikolai, there is no longer a sense that there can be a recovery. Nikolai

is already dead – in fact the priest announces him dead moments too soon (*Anna Karenina*, 458) – except he keeps on living, and agonizing, and Levin has no sense of what one says or does in these situations, or how he was supposed to feel about death when it was right in front of his face.

Kitty's presence in this time is essential for both Levin and his brother. Nikolai is comforted by her surety, and she does her best to look after every need, even the needs of his soul. She persuades him to take his last confession and Extreme Unction, although after it is over he tells Levin that it was only for her sake in spite of his seeming sincerity while he underwent the religious acts. Levin realized how much he needed her there, as well. "Had Levin been alone with his brother Nicholas, he would have waited in still greater horror not knowing what to do next" (*Anna Karenina*, 451). She does know what to do next, without needing any special knowledge, and his realization of this is one of the few productive things he accomplishes during his presence at Nikolai's deathbed. "When his brother is dying, Levin finds that for all his reading of the great philosophers, he can only gape in horror at his brother's condition and the terrible mystery of death" (Morson, 16). To Kitty, there is no mystery. Levin's realization of this leads him toward his final revelations on philosophy and brings up the same theme that occurred while at confession: sometimes, philosophy can only muddy the waters.

3.2 Pondering Death and Suicide

Nikolai's life ends and we have a beginning of sorts for Levin. No longer can he ignore the questions that plague him, questions he once thought that he would address later, whenever later happened to be. Later arrived when Nikolai died. "Ever since his brother's death, Levin has grown increasingly horrified by the way in which morality

sharpens the problem of life's meaning" (Morson, 199). He begins to see that death is everywhere, and even fears strongly for Kitty's life when she is giving birth to their son. For a brief moment when he sees her in labor he sees a look on her face that he equates with death, and this statement is especially resonant because we know that he has seen death. We experienced him watching death, and we know his reaction and aversion to it. It puts his strange, almost disappointing pity and aversion to his own son into a different perspective, knowing that he has seen this look upon Kitty's face.

Levin sees death even in places that should be so happy, like the birth of his child, and this makes his fear of it even more powerful. "Foreseeing death makes it appear horrible and speeds its coming; the more you seek to flee it, the closer you feel to it" (Rousseau, 28). There can be no running away from death, and Levin understands this. Meaning and diversion are the only natural responses to death (Orwin, 146). He cannot divert himself, and as much as he searches for meaning, he cannot seem to find it, and this leads him to a strange state of being which is only touched on briefly in Tolstoy's narration but is incredibly significant to consider: Levin contemplates suicide, so much that he has to actually hide from himself instruments with which he might commit suicide.

Levin is despairing because of his lack of meaning in life. "It was his belief that to be meaningful, life must be justified by theory" which leads him into this despair (Morson, 212). Despite his realization that death cannot be theorized, or that those who do not theorize it are the ones who understand it, he continues to attempt to theorize life, and when he finds that he is helpless, he feels the urge to end his life. "It is especially important that what drives this happy and healthy man toward suicide is not sadness,

illness, grief, regret, or depression” (Morson, 203). In fact, Tolstoy stresses on that very page how much Levin had to be thankful for, how incredibly happy he was with his life. This is not Vronsky, who shoots himself because he feels he has lost Anna, nor is this Anna, who throws herself in front of a train because she feels that this is the only way she has left to hurt the lover she suspects has just abandoned her. This is a happily married man with a newborn child and plenty of pursuits he enjoys. He has friends, an extended family he cares for and which cares for him in return.

“Levin, who is blessed in everything and who leads such a normal life” is hiding rope from himself (Strakhov, 762). Philosophy has failed him, he is too honest with himself to attempt to merely distract himself from life’s questions, as Stiva does. But I think most importantly, Levin’s idyllic view of what his future family life would be has come true – except that it is normal. He gets everything he hoped for, but life goes on as it has. He still has failings. Kitty, it turns out, is not an angel but a human being, and his son’s birth brought on different emotions from his expectations. His life is excellent, but it is less than he expected, and he cannot reconcile this with his still not understanding what to live for.

“But he did not hang or shoot himself and went on living” (*Anna Karenina*, 714).

This line has every possibility of being one of the most perfect lines in the novel. It treats such an important thing – Levin’s refraining from suicide – with levity, matter-of-fact shortness, and simply tells us that he just didn’t kill himself. Because that is all there is. He did not kill himself, and it does not have to be a grand affair. He does not have his answers yet, but he does have some measure of happiness in spite of his despair,

and the important thing is that he *continues to look* for the answers he has yet to find. He does not realize it at the time, but he chooses, in not giving up, life.

When Levin reaches his peace, finds the answers he seeks, the question disappears. His suicidal thoughts are never mentioned again. They become utterly irrelevant to his reality. “Nikolai has only a vial of iodine to grasp onto in his dying hours, whereas Levin has something more substantial: a family, a community, a connection to the traditions and values of noble upbringing” (Kaufman, 170). Nikolai’s repeated insistence that Levin marry, that Levin settle down and find a wife and start a family, could be his attempt to keep Levin from becoming him. Levin and Nikolai share a discontent with the seeming meaninglessness all around them, the mores of society, the not knowing. Nikolai made decisions, which we are not privy to the details to – no doubt much of it is scandalous – and they brought him to a place where if not for the goodness of his brother’s wife and the love of his mistress, Marya, he would have died alone with his bottle of iodine. He pointed Levin away from his path, toward a wife, toward Kitty, and insisted that he marry. In spite of the spiritual struggles he faced even after marrying, when he had his spiritual revelation he already had in place the framework of a happy life full of the meaning he was seeking all along.

4. Levin’s Spiritual Revelation

“In Anna Karenina the poet has to show the reader how to live well” (Orwin, 143-4). By the end of Book VII, we have a very clear picture of what it can look like to not live well. What we haven’t gotten yet is the completion of Levin’s search, the search for the meaning of life.

Levin has continued to struggle along in his usual way since his bouts of suicidal thoughts. It has not proved any more successful than it had. “All of Levin’s attempts to find answers to this quandary in nonmaterialist philosophers from Plato to Schopenhauer to the Russian religious thinker Aleksei Khomiakov come to nothing” (Alexandrov, 161). We see him continuing to go about his life as those around him do the same, for better or for worse, but he is still unsatisfied, still searching. It is not until a conversation he has with a peasant that he finds something to give him a positive outlook on his life once more. The peasant’s sentiments about what it means to live for God means are eerily similar to something Rousseau’s Savoy priest says: “The difference is that the good man orders his life to serve the whole, and the wicked man makes use of the whole to serve himself” (Rousseau, 46). This whole section, and particularly the words of the priest, tends to be oversimplified or made into things they are not. This is not a moral Levin finds, nor is this somehow the sign of the infinite wisdom of the peasants. It is a solid proverb that is being fed to him, and as Morson points out, “Sayings and proverbs favor the prepared mind” (210). Had Levin been told this answer at the beginning of the novel, or even somewhere in the middle, it would not have resonated with him properly, nor would it have resonated with the reader. Not only did Levin have to undergo significant philosophical difficulty, but we had to see the difficulties of other characters that chose different paths meet their outcomes to understand why this proverb of the peasant is universal.

4.1 Conversion?

The peasant’s words have an instant effect on Levin and he goes off to a field to contemplate them more completely, to make sure that he had discovered what he thinks

he has. The more he considers, the happier he becomes. He realizes that this knowledge of God, the knowledge the peasant has just shared with him, is an instinctive thing, something children understand and adults have taken from them by increased “learning.” “Some dilemmas that appear philosophical cannot be answered philosophically” (Morson, 201), and in fact, Levin decides that the philosophers are behaving like spoiled children, who are destroying the very thing that gives them life and meaning. Indeed, he realizes that all the people he respects are believers, from the women and peasants to Lvov and their shared father-in-law. I stress “respects” rather than saying “likes”, as Alexandrov does (160), because Stiva is conspicuously missing from the list of people Levin considers, and it cannot be doubted that Levin very much likes Stiva. But whether or not Stiva is actually a believer is actually an interesting question, and one is inclined to think that even if he technically believes in God he does so because the Liberal Party said God exists, not because of any deep conviction of his soul, and certainly not because he feels that living for God is necessary for living well. Similarly, however much Levin likes Stiva – after all, everyone likes Stiva – he does not respect him.

Levin then falls into the trap that many new believers fall into. “He believes he has found the answer to all his problems” (Fort, 18). While he has certainly found something, it is not the answer to all of his problems, as will be explored in a moment. What has he found? Levin has found the formula to living well, and this formula depends on faith, depends on a system of living for the good of others, and for the happiness of everyone. That so many diverse messages can be found within this one seen is a testament to the fact that this is not exactly an answer that Levin has found, but as Kaufman says, an “attitude”, a “way of living” (150). It cannot be neatly packaged into a

moral, because it is not exactly the peasant's words, but those words in conjunction with the questions and experiences Levin has struggled with for hundreds of pages.

Levin still has his pride, which was always one of his strongest sins. While he sits there in the field, contemplating his newfound spiritual philosophy, he attempts to redirect a bug along its path. This has been interpreted in many ways, but considering the bug his brother saves later, which is struggling in honey and in need of outside assistance, I believe that Fort is correct in saying that Levin's attempt to redirect the bug that does not need any help is an emblem of his pride (19). Levin does not realize this. He believes that everything will be different now that he has his answers, and that suddenly the idyllic life he had always imagined will become a reality.

Of course, this is not what happens. This is a story about life, not about fairytales. He returns to his life and finds that he still gets cross with the servants, still is frustrated when he tries to converse with Sergei Ivanovich, and so he wonders "whether he has really found anything at all" (Fort, 20). Life has once again failed to meet his unrealistic expectations, and so once again he is discouraged.

This has led to a heavy debate as to whether or not Levin has, in fact, experienced a conversion in this section. There is a strong view that this is "not actually a conversion" but merely a step "to still greater insights" (Fort; 22,18). Morson, on the other hand, says that Levin's revelation is one of only two convincing conversions in all of world literature (10). Alexandrov says that Levin "rediscovers" his faith (164). I then asked myself as I considered whether or not Levin experiences a conversion, what exactly is a conversion?

Two definitions I found were relevant. The first: “The bringing of anyone over to a specific religious faith.” The second: “The turning of sinners to God; a spiritual change from sinfulness, ungodliness, or worldliness to love of God and pursuit of holiness” (“Conversion”). So a conversion is an event that can signify both beginning and end of a process. This is what Levin’s whole journey, his search throughout the book, is: Levin’s storyline is a long, drawn out conversion process which culminates not in his thoughts in the field after talking to the peasant, but rather in his considerations after realizing that life will go on in much the same way, and that this inward process was still a process and not the answer to an immediately different life. “[Levin] knows that life is intrinsically good and purposeful and that he has the power through moral choice to contribute to that purpose” (Kaufman, 185). The final book of *Anna Karenina* is a revelation, but Levin’s portion of the novel is a conversion. He has used his “moral choice” to do good, to live for God, and to find meaning in the wonderful life he has. Kaufman supports the idea of a more comprehensive view of Levin’s storyline as a conversion simply by pointing out that Tolstoy believed “in the wholeness of a human person in relation to the totality of circumstances that make up his or her life” (3). It is impossible to take away any of the scenes and struggles of Levin’s story and end up with the same result. He would not have reacted in quite the same way to the peasant; he would not have understood the new truths in the same light.

Levin’s final question to pose against his newfound spiritual philosophy is what place the church has within his life. Schopenhauer, who took a very negative view of religion, even said that “Religions are necessary for the people, and an inestimable benefit to them. But if they oppose themselves to the progress of mankind in the

knowledge of truth, they must with the utmost possible forbearance be set aside” (*The Living Thoughts of Schopenhauer*, 121). This is exactly the weight which Levin gives to his pondering of his new views on the Church. There are many beliefs Levin is not sure he can reconcile himself to, but “That Levin sees these matters as imponderable leads him to the surprising conclusion that they are also irrelevant to his faith” (Alexandrov, 168). The truly surprising part about it is that a man, who spent so long agonizing over such questions, rejecting God because he could not answer these questions in a way that satisfied him, decides to renounce the questions so quickly. But this is a sign not that Levin is being hasty, but rather that he has finally learned his lesson that not all questions can be answered, and especially not answered philosophically. Levin eventually decides that the Church does more good than bad. As Tolstoy writes in a later article, “Every religion is an establishment by man of his relation to the Infinite Existence of which he feels himself a part” (*What is Religion?*, 7).

This appears to be more or less the conclusion Levin comes to when he tries to think about which religion has the right of it. Schopenhauer also said, “Everyone thinks his religion is sacred, and therefore you ought to respect it” (*Religion*, 3). This is not a far cry from our earlier conception of Levin, a man who felt uncomfortable going to church because he did not want to offend the sacred beliefs of others. His decision that religion does not harm his faith is not necessarily a wholly positive thing depending upon your view of the novel. Gustafson, whose insistence of the importance of orthodoxy and its influence on Tolstoy might have a hard time explaining away a point Schultze makes: “he provides a singularly weak defense of Orthodox Christianity, whose chief virtue is that it does not destroy what Levin feels is the main thing: faith in goodness” (94). Still, it gives

him a confidence that both his faith and the church can be reconciled, which is important for things like the spiritual education of his son, if Lvov is to be believed. Questions like Katavasov's poignant quip of "What is a soul?" (*Anna Karenina*, 733) can be looked at in a different light: it is not relevant to his faith, it cannot be reasoned, and Levin chooses to live a life of happiness devoted to God rather than agonize over questions that can never be answered. He chooses life.

Chapter 4: Concerns of the Epigraph

The goal of an epigraph is to shed light, to provide a lens with which to approach whatever it precedes. *Anna Karenina*'s epigraph is short: "Vengeance is mine; I will repay" (*Anna Karenina*, 1). By nature, it is divided into two different parts. The first, the speaker claims vengeance. The second, there is a promise of a sentence passed by the speaker. For a statement meant to shed light and provide a lens, it is an incredibly open-ended choice. The speaker has been said to be everyone from God to Anna to Tolstoy himself, and the fact that Tolstoy lists no attribution does not help clarify how he intended the epigraph to be read.

1. Structure and the Epigraph

We could have ended up with a different epigraph to *Anna Karenina*. Tolstoy "went through many drafts, which included several changes to the epigraph" (Fort, 12). There could have been a different epigraph, but, despite changes made, the fact that Tolstoy chose this one suggests that he carefully considered the effect it would have on the reading of the text and decided it would most enhance the reading. Fort points out that in spite of the fact that Levin's storyline was actually a later addition to the novel, especially to the extent that it exists in the final product, this change and return to the epigraph as we know it suggests that "he must have considered Levin's connection" (12).

This consideration led me to believe that it is probably not Anna speaking in the epigraph. Her suicide is an act of revenge against Vronsky, but as I have already explicated that the suicide is not the point of the novel, making an epigraph that is

entirely about her final act of vengeance would be a rather silly thing for Tolstoy to do. If Anna is not the one speaking the epigraph, though, who is? And is it, perhaps, possible that the speaker changes based on the storyline?

“It is generally accepted,” Schultze says, “that Tolstoi got his epigraph from Schopenhauer” (5), although it has not always been so generally accepted. It also resembles a biblical passage, and it was speculated, Fort says, that the quote belonged to Romans or the passage in Deuteronomy, which the Romans passage quotes (1). The Romans quotation is led into by a call for a person to not take their own revenge but to forgive your enemy, and the Deuteronomy says that the Lord will call down disaster in his vengeance. If Tolstoy meant the epigraph to be a biblical injunction, it certainly doesn’t have Anna coming away looking very justified, and if Tolstoy meant for it to be a reference to Schopenhauer, the Schopenhauer passage is also quoting the Bible.

I obviously do not know whether Tolstoy was inspired to use the passage because of his recent reading of Schopenhauer, or if he thought of the biblical verses specifically when choosing his epigraph. I believe it matters little. Either way, the speaker is God. It is possible that some might argue that the speaker can be God or Anna alternatively, and that it was left unattributed for this purpose. However, because Anna as the speaker would so vastly change the nature of the epigraph, I believe this is more wishful reading on the part of people who want to sympathize with Anna. It is more likely that the epigraph was left unattributed either because he did not want to choose one of the multiple verses it is found in, or because he thought it was so recognizable that it needed to attribution. Many more people have read the Bible than have read Schopenhauer.

Because God is the speaker, it need not have a different meaning throughout the novel. The epigraph, instead, is part of the key to living well that Levin discovers during his revelation, the key that Anna ignores in her quest for love. I agree with Fort that Tolstoy carefully considered the interaction of the epigraph and its injunction against judgment when writing Levin as well as Anna, and that it works with the structure of the novel to link the storylines together.

2. God as Speaker

God being the speaker of the epigraph does not eliminate all problems with it, particularly for Gustafson. He says that “The evil God, the one who avenges, punishes, and causes suffering, is our creation, necessary to us for our own self-justification” (Gustafson, 144). This statement has its own issues, and the idea that a vengeful God is a creation perpetuated by the Church is something he champions (144), in spite of the fact that there are no fewer than three mentions of God in scripture specifically saying a version of the epigraph Tolstoy chose.

Still, Gustafson is not the only person uncomfortable with the conventional Hebrew idea of a vengeful God. Rousseau’s priest also is reluctant to say expressly that God is vengeful. He makes allowances for the possibility, as man can never be sure of the nature of God, but he remarks that “If the supreme justice is vengeful, it takes vengeance in this life” (Rousseau, 32).

“Vengeance is mine” does not necessarily mean that God will take vengeance, just that it is not man’s right to take vengeance. “I shall repay” probably does mean God will exact some form of vengeance, but whether this merely means that God will ensure that people will receive what they deserve or that it is, indeed, closer to what Gustafson

expresses as an “evil God,” it is difficult to say. It does make it clear, however, that God is the only one allowed to judge mankind. This is ironic, because as Orwin points out, the epigraph “provides a standard for judging events and characters” (179). Even as we utilize the epigraph to enlighten us about the novel (which is the very reason it exists), we are violating it.

The epigraph then applies not only to the characters, but to us as readers. Perhaps the narrator does not judge Stiva, or Anna, or anyone else, because the reader is not supposed to either. Only God can judge, which is why living for God should be the focus of a man’s life. Rousseau’s priest expresses the futility not only in judging others, but also interest in the divine judgment of others (32). What good does it do our own salvation to concern ourselves with the divine judgment of other men? Only God can know if they lived for God, and only God can repay them for their deeds, whether in this life or in the next.

3. Levin and the Epigraph

Early Levin is guilty of “excessive moralism,” which the epigraph warns against (Orwin, 174). The most obviously wrong version of this moralism is that he judges others very harshly. From the nails of Stiva’s co-worker to the women Stiva amuses himself with and a French woman who they see while out at dinner, we see Levin doing a vast amount of judging people he hardly knows within his first few chapters in the novel. He knows that he cannot be hypocritical and corrects himself as he is condemning fallen women, but knowing that it is wrong to be hypocritical and knowing that it is wrong to be judgmental are separate things.

His view on judgment is shifted after Kitty's refusal of him. Levin's visit to his brother, Nikolai, could be emblematic of this shift, as Gustafson suggests. "Himself rejected, Levin now sees that he must not reject" (134). This is a temporary illumination, the first of many on Levin's path to faith; it explains why by the end of the novel he hopes that his discovery will lead to him not being short with people, which is a symptom of his judgment of others.

Part of the flaw in judging others, however, is that it is unjust to pass judgment on others when you yourself are flawed. As Rousseau's priest proclaims, "What right have I to judge things?" (7). Even more important than the injustice of judging others when you are not blameless, however, is that self-judgment in and of itself is against this same injunction, and is an equally unhealthy practice. Gustafson discusses how the ideas of self-judgment are central to *Anna Karenina*. Finding no fault in yourself and no desire for change lead to rationalizing of the past: this is where Anna's refusal to change her path leads her. The acceptance of guilt and quest for perfection lead to rationalizing the future, which is Levin's path (Gustafson, 146). It is good that they think about their actions, but they are perhaps overzealous.

Anna refuses to believe that she has taken entirely the wrong path, although she does keep herself from being fully happy in her decision by clinging to things she knows she cannot have and refusing to take any offer her husband makes for her in order to try to ease her situation – whatever his motives in his various attempts. This is part of her judgment of herself as well, because although she does not want to commit herself to admonishing her decision to become Vronsky's mistress, she continually says how

wicked she is to herself, and punishes herself needlessly. If vengeance belongs to God, this is the wrong action.

Levin punishes himself continually when he considers his own crimes, thinking them to be worse than perhaps others around him would think them, from the doubt he confesses to the priest to the carnal sins he mentions at dinner to Stiva. He even thinks that once she has read his diaries and knows both of his atheism and his sexual liaisons that Kitty will no longer want to marry him. This news does cause Kitty a bit of distress initially – more the women than anything else – but she marries him, so it was obviously not as distressing as he thought it would be. On the other hand, he has a bit of a habit of forgetting his sins and mistakes when he witnesses the sins and mistakes of others, or even just hears of them. He sees the vanity or pride of the rich society people around him and is disgusted by it. In these moments, Levin does not consider his own pride. He takes as much pride in being different from society as the people he judges take in being a part of society, and so he uses finding fault in others as a way of avoiding looking at the faults in himself.

Thus, the epigraph's two-part injunctions against judging oneself and judging others fits both main characters, but it is Levin who realizes the meaning of the injunction by the end, although he does not achieve it. He strives toward it. "For Levin the epigraph is an injunction that commands both that he limit his judgment, and that he accept God's judgment of himself" (Fort, 12). This is likely not comfortable for a man who is already undergoing so much change, but it is a part of his conversion, a part of how to live well, and a way of learning how to live for God. If one lives for God, one must submit oneself entirely to God's judgment, and that means not only accepting the consequences of that,

whatever they may be, but also to do as Rousseau suggests and not be even interested in the judgment of others. For what right do we have?

4. The Epigraphic Lens

Understanding what Tolstoy's masterpiece accomplishes lends a greater understanding to the epigraph. Having a clear sense of the epigraph lends a clearer sense to the reading of the rest of the novel. Still, it is only another piece of the puzzle. The epigraph, "like any other aspect of the novel taken in isolation, can shed some light on the meaning of the novel, but cannot illuminate the whole novel" (Schultze, 13). As with life itself, you can lose the point in picking, you can find what you want to find when you look close enough for it, but in considering many parts of the whole and how they interact, the epigraph takes on a more comprehensive meaning, an instruction from God on how better to live well. Levin learns the instruction, and although he is a slow learner, the reader has faith by the end of the novel that he is a diligent one.

Conclusion

Anna Karenina is a novel about people and the way they live their lives. Orwin's suggestion that Anna chooses evil and Levin chooses good, and their fates are decided by these choices has some measure of resonance. Western readers at the very least are acutely familiar with the concept that choices determine fate, whether it be Santa Claus leaving coal for naughty children or the familiar moral that good triumphs evil. It is not hard to read such a moral teaching into the stories that unfold within the novel.

Yet Tolstoy did not write a fable when he wrote *Anna Karenina*. This is not a collection of moral teachings tied in a neat bow. This is a realistic view of life, of how to live it well, of what life can look like when not living well. If a simple moral can be conjured up for such a novel, it is false. Life has no moral-of-the-story.

Of course, novels are not perfect doubles of life. Life does not have symbolism, rarely contains any reliable story arc, and choices do not always correspond neatly to their results. Art will never perfectly imitate life, and it is impossible to make life perfectly imitate art.

Levin does not choose good. Levin makes moral choices that Tolstoy would say, in the end, are good ones. Levin and Anna do not concern themselves with questions like good and evil. They ask questions like why and how. Why do things happen the way they do? How do I live? Why is this the way things are? How do I keep living?

As Levin's questions grow simpler, his answers come to him. As Anna's questions grow away from her reality, so her answers lead her further astray. It is by

asking the wrong questions, perhaps, that Anna meets the end she does, and not anything to do with living evilly. She does not think of how to live, but merely how to live for her passions, her desires. As Schopenhauer's suggestion of a simple man says, when Anna lives for her lover, her son, the friendships she thinks she's formed, and they disappoint her, she despairs, as Levin does when his ideals cannot be met by his much happier situation.

Levin does not choose good. Anna does not choose evil. To say that Anna chooses death is perhaps obvious. After all, what else is killing yourself but choosing to die? But her choice to die happened much sooner, when she committed herself to the idea of dying in childbirth. After she survived the labor that brought her daughter into the world, nothing satisfied her, and her fate was sealed because she had already chosen to die, had already resigned herself to death, thinking it better than struggling with the disappointments of the life around her, the lift built on the wrong questions. Levin chooses life, not at the end of the story, but when he chooses to continue searching, to go on living, even when he met despair in his dissatisfaction.

There was nothing cosmic in either of these moments, his going on living, her preparing herself for dying in labor. He simply asked the right question: How to live? In that one question is contained the thing to seek, the only thing worth seeking, and the will to continue to live even while despairing, as long as the search continues.

Anna Karenina is not a novel about suicide, adultery, good and evil. It is simply a novel about life.

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